
HOWARD FRENCH; 8-18-03; LEMON GROVE, CA**HOWARD FRENCH**

Enlisted in Omaha. Did boot camp in San Diego. Joined Okey on April 22, 1932. Boarded in Long Beach.

1933 earthquake in Long Beach. Was ashore at the all-Navy fights at the Navy Field. He knew how the heavyweight fight was going to end so he left early to avoid the crowd to go up town to get something to eat. Was about half-way up the Pike when it hit. Saw a big light crash right behind him. Really rocking around. You couldn't run you couldn't walk fast, just kind of stood still. Shook for quite awhile. People running by him like crazy. Went up the main avenue. Shore patrol said everyone should go back to ship. When he returned to ship he didn't even have time to go to the head. Told to go to the armory. Got a gun, fell in, went back to shore in a launch. They gave him a 30.06. There for three days. Had orders to shoot looters. He didn't see any. Had a beat like a cop would walk. His beat was Cherry Avenue. All of the crew participated except for a watch that was left aboard ship. Sailors and Marines from other ships too. He guessed several hundred.

Civil service test went smoothly. He guessed the population of Tacoma at 50K to 75K.

1936 cruise. Picked up the middies on east coast. Divided among three ships. Stood watches. After they'd been in Europe about three days they received the word to offload the middies. Went to Spain. He said for six months. Some sailors that were ashore at the time caught up with the ship later. Went down to Gibraltar. Alternated between Marseilles and Gibraltar. Picked up Nationals, dropped them off at either end. Went back for another load. Did it for six months. One day they were in a harbor. Old biplane came along. Hand-dropped something on the Deutschland. Watched from the forecastle. They never got the guy. Next day the Deutschland got underway and went up the coast to some small city and bombarded it as retribution. Seemed like every time the Okey left a harbor the firing would start. No problems when the Okey was in port. Picked up refugees, counsel, women and kids all over the place. Put most of them down in the officer's quarters. Moved officer's out. Not just junior officers. If they were on the west cost of Spain they dropped the refugees off in Marseilles, if they were on the east coast they would drop them off in Gibraltar.

Paul: Vedigo or Vertigo was place where flag incident occurred.

They stopped at any place they could get a battleship into. Always anchored out at sea. Never went close to the beach—could get shot there. They sent 50-foot motor launches in to get them. No canvas bags, or cargo nets, refugees came up the gangway just like anyone else. If they had come up in bags or nets, Howard would have been there to do it. They did bring some luggage up in nets. Usually picked up a couple hundred refugees before offloading them. Heard there was a baby born.

Not familiar with train car incident. Didn't happen on his watch.

He thought the Arizona backed into the Okey. Laughed. Was not above decks until after it happened.

Recalls firing right over the stern of another battleship in the fog. When the fog raised he couldn't believe how close they had been.

When to the 5th Division when he made first class. Chief Petty Officer at time of the attack. Was in the 1st and 5th division. He was in the 1st division for 6 years. He was assigned to the No. 8 broadside gun.

Morning of December 7th. Had gotten a newspaper from the boat deck and was sitting down in the 5th division living quarters listening to the radio while he read it. Alarm came over. He heard the call to quarters and call to man the AA. 5th division manned the ammunition supply for the 6th division during general quarters. Heard Rommel's expletive. Counted five hits. Was on the third deck in the ammunition supply. Went down from the fifth division to get to the ammo supply area. Going from 5th division down below; guys were everywhere trying to get to general quarters. Hatches were clogged up with people. Some guys didn't bother using ladders; they just jumped down to the next deck. Jumped on top of each other. Howard had a feeling that the ship was going to roll over. He ordered everyone topside, said it was going to roll over. Chased them out. Had his heat set on. Couldn't hear anything on it. Never heard the order to abandon ship.

Howard went up to the mess deck. Stuff sliding on the decks. Started aft. Tried to open an overhead hatch but something had fallen down it. Couldn't open it. Came down. Started aft. Lights were off. Could see light coming through where the cooks and bakers bunked right off the quarterdeck. Went through a hatch onto main deck aft. Two fellas behind him. Heard that some ensign went berserk, had his .45 out, and wouldn't let anybody out. Paul said Irving Davenport. When Howard got topside he didn't see anybody there. Bomb went off between the Okie and the Maryland. Water knocked him flat. Right next to turret three. Got up. No one around. Decided to go to the boat deck to get life jacket. Went up over the side of the aft 5" gun. Got life jackets out of the boats.

Paul: big container aft of the boat deck. Some guy trying to cut the lines. Paul held the lines while other guy cut the. As they loosened up along the bottom they fell off over the port side. The life jackets Howard threw into the water floated. Boat was rocking in its skids, was going to dump out of there. Decided it was time to get out of there. Climbed back down to the main deck. Ship really canted over. Climbed over the life line onto the side and walked right down the side. Never got his feet wet. Knew the ship couldn't sink. Ship had an 108-foot beam. Slippery. Had anti-fouling on the bottom (?). Got behind the anti-roll keel because of strafing. About 30 or 40 other guys there. Nobody got hit that he could see.

50-foot launch tied to a boom on the starboard side. Had been drug up over the bottom. Saw Kenworthy standing up on top. Howard told him he would get some guys to get the boat off so they could get off. Kenworthy mumbled something, could hardly talk, just scared to death. Howard went back to get the boat. About 25 or 30 guys rocked the boat back and forth, then slid it into the water. Pulled up alongside the ship. Grease on ship so launch slid real good. Climbed in. Howard said climb aboard, we're leaving. About 15 or 20 jumped in the boat. Rest stayed behind the anti-roll keel. Engineer in the boat named Whitey. Howard told him to go. Battery was dead, wouldn't start. Told some guy to shove them off. Tide was flowing south.

Went down to gas dock. Climbed out. Tied it up. Flower came along and burned it. Neosho was gone by then. He looked at his watch when he was talking to Kenworthy; it was 8:13. Had a 21-jewel Walthem hanging across from two pockets in the shorts he was wearing. Arizona blew up before that. He was on top of the ship when Arizona blew up. Chunks of steel thirty-feet long went up in the air. No place to hide. Chunks landed on the airfield.

Gas dock. Guy in the boat with him, 1st class, was sticking with Howard. Decided to go up to the administration building. Walking fast, airplanes all over, stayed close to buildings. Sick bay on the island, Howard standing at one corner of it, other fell at other corner. California right across the dirt from sick bay building. Planes were trying to bomb it. Something hit in the patio and went right underneath the concrete. Never exploded. Shook the whole area. Howard and Boyer decide to leave. Went towards the ad building. Went back later to sick bay and saw big bomb, one of armor-piercing bomb.

Says torpedo planes fired forward on the way in. Doesn't recall any torpedo planes returning to strafe. Didn't see planes coming in on their torpedo runs.

Stayed on Ford Island the rest of the day. Just milled around with the multitudes. No organization. Mass confusion. He thought he could get direction from the ad building. It was a mad house. Went into the parking lot next to the ad building, a few rows of cars, got down in between them. Saw the rest of the show. Saw cruiser come racing down with its booms still out with boats still on them. When he came alongside the pier he just wipes the boats off, and lost its booms. Saw 15 dive-bombers dive on the Nevada and set it afire. Saw the Shaw blow up. Some photographer was there snapping pictures.

Got his first meal two days later. Thinks he got a sandwich that night. Had a blanket. Slept in a big old concrete tube, six foot in diameter, four or five of them. Got out of the rain (I think he was speaking in general terms; no one else mentioned that it rained that night), said it usually rained at night. All hell broke loose at about 9:00 when the carrier planes came in with their lights on. Three were shot down. Two, maybe three, landed.

The next day they took all the 1st class, had to report to the sub base. They wanted them to write what they had seen and what they had done during the attack. Captain was overseeing it. Captain would read each story. Howard named places and names. Captain said he didn't doubt a word of what Howard had written, but said he didn't have officers enough to court-martial everyone. Gave it back to Howard. Said they needed officers to man the ships. Ten pages long.

Some other Okie guys had the Captain's gig. Said they would take Howard wherever. Asked to go to the Tennessee. Knew a lot of people there. Wanted to get reassigned there. Climbed up a rope ladder. Got on deck, looked around. Nobody there. Went down below to find a buddy, Swatzer. Told he was up on deck on the gun watch. They went down to personnel. Got assigned to the Tennessee. Everyone that had come aboard was transferred off because the Tennessee was going stateside. Transferred to Yard Craft. Tug master and harbor pilot. Was aboard the Tennessee for a week or two.

Came out the S-division compartment and saw nobody else on the main deck. Then bomb hit, big splash. Climbed up a ladder to the boat deck for life jackets. Catwalk along side it. Here comes one of his petty officers; Winfield "Smokey" Struthers. Howard said, "How you doing, Winfield?" "Ok, Howard, and over the side he went. Swam over to the Maryland. Somebody pulled him aboard. Struthers was forty-five and about 260 lbs.

Smokey was the only guy Howard saw on the boat deck. Jumped over the starboard side. Had to clear the blister that stuck out about three feet. Saw about a hundred men in the water between the Okie and the Maryland. Anti-roll bar starts just forward of the propeller area. Heard bullets pinging on the anti-roll bar.

Howard liked Bodie. Didn't make ways. Stable individual. One day he had an assignment to take the Chicago out to sea. Bode greeted him on the bridge. Asked Howard to stay aboard and make the trip with him. Chicago was later sunk..

Said Foy was a nice man, a gentleman. Easy transition from Foy to Bode. Bode was aboard about a month. Howard had the cleanest division on the ship. They could inspect whenever they want to. Howard told his men that once their work was done they could take a whale boat and go over to the beach.

Match-stick in a crack.. Have a couple of men take that down to the carpenter's shop and saw it up. Foy used to shoot the breeze with French. Other officer's had the gall to ask him what they were talking about. Thought Okie was a good ship.

Was aboard ship on Saturday. Went to bed.

Thought it was strange that all the ships were in port that morning. His division officer bunked with a decoding officer. As they were approaching Pearl on Friday the decoding officer said, "Do you see any ships coming out of there?" Went down below then came back. Said, "there's supposed to be one task force at sea at all times." Rarely tied up alongside battleships.

Heard story of submarine sightings. They got him up at 4:30 am to launch the seaplanes to look for them. Went out every morning. He would retrieve them. His job was to hook them in off a sea sled. He would raise them and park them. One on turret three, the other on a dolly on the deck. Usually the 6th division would hook them in on the port side, 5th division would bring them in on the starboard side. Evidently the 6th division damaged a plane, from then on the 5th division would do it on both sides. Morning patrols. Seaplanes would be gone four or five hours. Maybe rotated with other ships. Howard didn't recall sighting any subs.

Paul saw one from the signal bridge and saw a sub by the light of a star shell. 6th Division fires the star shells. 1st class signalman that had a battle station in no. 1 plot. Skags. Skags came out of the forward area up there and he says, there all out from up forward there Frenchie. Frenchie said, lets' get out of here. Skags went up the ladder ahead of Frenchie. He didn't make it.

When Paul returned to the ship in 1943 it was pitch dark. Had a flashlight.

Howard said a lot of guys were killed up forward.

When Howard Came up off the third deck and started to go aft there were two ensigns behind him, he glanced at him, and kept right on walking. When he got to the hatch he looked back but they were gone.

Howard was standing with one of his gunners mate at their battle station. The gunners mate decided to go to the port side. He died. Howard was gun captain for the no. 8 gun. Had ten men. Gun shields were not on that morning. They were stored. Only time they were used was during heavy weather. They were stored otherwise. Fastened to the bulkheads. 5/38s had a shell. Not a projectile with a powder bag. Ammo for the 5/38s was not down below for the guns (he wasn't really sure). There were magazines at each gun that were full of shells. Didn't know if the firing locks had been removed. Ordnance guys took care of that.